

# Across a Red Landscape: Mars and Science Fiction

Robert Hoge

Throughout history Mars has been a sign, a symbol and a power. The changes in our thoughts, feelings and desires for the planet have matched the changes in our knowledge.

Science fiction's love affair with the red planet too, has paralleled the scientific knowledge we have garnered about it.

Even in its infancy, science fiction was drawn to Mars. While H. G. Wells didn't take us there in *The War of the Worlds*, he did bring Martians to us. It took more than ten novels from Edgar Rice Burroughs to popularize the idea of sending a human to Mars.

A steady series of short stories and novels followed Burroughs. Many authors did their best to accommodate their stories with the most current scientific information available. Authors including Isaac Asimov, Arthur C Clarke and Robert Heinlein wondered in their fiction what a human-populated Mars would be like.

The arrival of Mariners VI and VII at Mars in the late 1960s provided authors with information to more realistically represent the planet in their fiction. While many authors took up the challenge it wasn't until nearly a decade ago that Mars started to shine particularly bright on science fiction's horizon.

In 1992, Kim Stanley Robinson published *Red Mars*, the first in a trilogy concerning the planet's colonisation. That year also saw the publication of Ben Bova's *Mars*. But it was Robinson's *Red Mars*, *Green Mars*, and *Blue Mars* that really set the sub-genre alight. Although not without its critics, Robinson's trilogy is the standout effort in terms of popularity and recognition by readers, critics and the scientific community.

Fuelled by the success of *Red Mars* and new missions to Mars, Gregory Benford, Greg Bear, Larry Niven, Geoffrey A. Landis, Ian Douglas and others launched books into the marketplace. Even renowned Mars scientist, Robert Zubrin tried his hand at fiction with *First Landing*.

The tendency of the more recent books has been to focus on how we might get to Mars and what we will do when we get there - for example, Benford's *The Martian Race* that tells of a contest between two consortia to get an expedition to Mars and back. Niven's *Rainbow Mars* goes pleasantly against the grain when the book's main character travels back in time to a Mars populated with beings that would be familiar to reader of Burroughs, H.G Wells and others.

Despite Niven's effort, the time of Mars being used as a convenient, familiar-but-alien backdrop to adventure stories seems past. Future science fiction stories will be heavily influenced by new discoveries about Mars. And who knows? Perhaps the next wave of Mars stories will accompany the arrival of humans on the planet.

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